

A quick guide to working with young people with disabilities:

1. Information is key

Overview: Throughout your teaching career, it's an absolute certainty that you will be regularly working with young people with a broad spectrum of visible and non visible disabilities. Teachers with an understanding of a broad range of disabilities are able to facilitate higher quality education to those that have special requirements. Understanding disabilities in both the typical sense of recognising them, key characteristics, etc, is a fantastic place to start. Your understanding will have a positive impact for your students, however we're looking to develop a deeper understanding of the responsibilities we have as role models and leaders, to provide opportunity and maximise the potential for growth in every student.

Although many disabilities present relatively consistent indicators, there are some that can go undiagnosed throughout a person's entire life. It is not uncommon for specialists to resist diagnosis until at least the age of seven for certain types of disability assessments. The list below has some of the most common and most commonly misunderstood disabilities that you are likely to come across in your teaching.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder & Aspergers

Autism is a developmental disorder with a broad range of characteristics. Most notably, autism affects people's social interaction skills, interpersonal communication and sensory processing. Autism can heighten people's sensitivity to auditory, visual and physical input. This can lead to discomfort, distress even physical pain to some people. Autistic people may develop repetitive, obsessive behaviours and self-soothing behaviours such as specific noises, body movements, or potentially self harm. Autism can affect speech and language- some autistic people have no or limited verbal communication. A less noticeable form of autism is Aspergers Syndrome. People with Aspergers may find social interaction challenging, as well as potentially having difficulty reading emotions. Aspergers can also present milder sensory processing issues, repetitive behaviours and specific fixations.

<https://www.autismnz.org.nz/>

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a very common disability, and can be tricky to identify. Dyslexia is a visual processing disorder that primarily affects reading and writing but in a broader environment, speech and language, organisation and time management. Dyslexia is a disability that bears no correlation with intelligence. People with dyslexia may struggle to interpret visual data and extract information from text. Commonly, dyslexic people will find reading and writing more challenging with specific issues such as letter orientation, 'jumping' words, missing lines, etc.

Dyslexic people often develop compensatory skills that take creative and powerful forms in other areas of their lives.

<http://www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz/>

Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects motor control, coordination, balance and the execution of small physical movements. People with dyspraxia may struggle to mimic physical actions, including gross and fine motor movements. Children with dyspraxia may experience difficulty and delay with walking, cycling and other general movements. Dyspraxia can be quite subtle, but can have a big impact on people's lives. Often stigmatised and misdiagnosed as clumsiness or carelessness, many people live with Dyspraxia without knowing.

<https://dyspraxia.org.nz/what-is-dyspraxia/>

ADHD

“Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder- one in 20 New Zealanders have ADHD, yet it is poorly understood and frequently remains undiagnosed” *ADHD NZ*

ADHD has 3 main subgroups that present different behaviours- these are Inattentive, Hyperactive & Impulsive. Inattentive behaviours include being easily distracted, lack of organisation, daydreaming, and a short attention span. Hyperactive behaviours include restlessness, fidgeting, always moving and difficulty sleeping / relaxing. Impulsive behaviours include acting without thought, accidents, interrupting, inappropriate comments.

<https://www.adhd.org.nz/what-is-adhd.html>

Attachment Disorder

Attachment disorders are the result of children not having their primary care needs met at an early developmental stage and thus not forming strong emotional bonds with their primary caregivers. This could be as a result of abuse, hospitalisation or exposure to prolonged traumatic experiences such as war. Children with attachment disorder may present as being distrustful of adults, lacking empathy and warmth, and have little interest in forming relationships / friendship. Attachment disorders are commonly linked to cortisol & adrenaline production (one of the body's natural stress response hormones). Some people with attachment disorders will actively pursue stressful / painful experiences to find 'relief'- this could be in the form of self harm, violent and aggressive behaviour, substance abuse and unnecessary risk taking.

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/parenting-family/attachment-issues-and-reactive-attachment-disorders.htm>

Global Development Delay

All children develop at their own pace. In some areas development may be faster than others. Likewise development may not always progress at the same pace. Progress may be fast for a time but then slow down for a while. For some children however, it is clear over time that they are not meeting a lot of the same milestones of children their own age.

The term Global Development Delay may be used when children show delays in two or more of five areas of development for at least six months. Common examples of developmental delays may be in speech and language development; cognitive development (thinking, understanding and learning); social and emotional development; daily life tasks (like toileting and dressing); gross motor and fine motor skills development. Sometimes children will grow out of this and catch up to people their own age in most areas, but otherwise delays can show that there are also more serious conditions there. Children with GDD still have the ability to learn and develop.

<https://parent2parent.org.nz/developmental-delay-dd-diagnosis-and-prognosis/>

Further useful links

<https://www.teachspeced.ca/student-needs> - good table of different strategies for different learning requirements

<https://www.teachervision.com/special-needs/teaching-students-special-needs>

2. Understanding the individual & recognising potential

Learning about disabilities isn't about labeling kids- the more information we have, the better equipped we'll be at being able to understand and reach each child we teach. Great teachers constantly look for ways that they can get to know and meet the needs of each person they teach, for example, how they communicate, what motivates them, what they love or hate, their interests and passions, etc. Aim to look at the person behind the disability. When we do this, we find normal people with normal desires and needs. **We want to define a child by their potential, not our perceived limitations.**

3. The need for challenge

People need to be challenged to grow. Having a disability does not change this. Kids thrive when we provide the balance between support, encouragement and challenge. Disabled people will face challenges throughout their life, just like every other person. Challenge is one of the most powerful vehicles for growth and change, and providing it at an appropriate level is a great way to ensure progress. We want to **remove boundaries, not remove challenge** for people with disabilities.

4. Becoming Advocates

As teachers working with children, we're the face of social change and opportunity. Becoming an advocate or a voice for people with disabilities is a powerful way to initiate change within our community. Normalising conversation around disabilities, encouraging people to ask, discuss and learn, and to become advocates themselves can have a profound impact on people's lives. To do this, research and learn about what your students are struggling with and how you can help them.